

Systematically Making Reading the Center of High School

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Well, I don't really like to read. Because it was not my thing. Also I wasn't good at it the only thing I did was look at the pictures to figure out maybe what it was about. But that really didn't help. Because I took tests on it and sometimes it helped. But most of the time it didn't.

When my reading class helped me I knew I could do it. But first, I realized that reading could take me places, for example- a new career, a lawyer etc. Then I started reading. I didn't like it at first, but then I got the hang of it.

"Now I can read." Life is easier than it use to be, I can read books higher than my reading level, and can finally read a book to my nine year old sister. My mom says, "Can you help me read this?" I use to say "Mom, I'm tired." She would ask me because my mom only speaks Spanish. But now when she asks me I say "Sure, why not?" And this is my reading life.

Ricardo Vergara, 2006

Seminole County Public Schools (SCPS) has systematically made reading the center of instruction in the district's 10 high schools. Data-supported improvements have taken place in reading achievement in a short time through a two-pronged approach grounded in professional development.

Before Reading Was the Center

Up until 2004, 76 percent of the district's high schools had received a grade of "A" or "B" from the state of Florida based on student performance on the Florida Comprehensive

Achievement Test (FCAT). Additionally, the district's Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores exceeded the state and national averages. Sixty five percent of 2004 seniors took the SAT with a district mean of 1048. The perception of SCPS both within the district and beyond was that it was a suburban enclave of high achievement.

Changing Perceptions

When the 2004 state-assigned school grades were released for the nine high schools, one dropped from an "A" to a "C," two dropped

from “B” to “C” and one dropped from a “C” to a “D.” An overlooked criterion of Florida’s grading plan, aligned with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), had impacted the school’s grades. According to this criterion:

Schools that aspire to be graded “C” or above, but do not make adequate progress with their lowest students in reading, must develop a School Improvement Plan component that addressed this need. If a school, otherwise graded “C” or “B,” does not demonstrate adequate progress in the current or prior year, the final grade will be reduced by one letter grade. If a school, otherwise graded “A” does not demonstrate adequate progress in the current year the final grade will be reduced by one letter grade. (*Grading Florida Public Schools 2004-2005, Florida Department of Education*)

Schools had failed to move the bottom 25 percent of the lowest level readers in high schools toward greater proficiency resulting in high school grades being reduced by one letter grade. Approximately 6000 students in grades 9-12 were reading below proficiency according to 2004 FCAT reading assessment. Quickly, the district developed a strategy to assist all students in being successful in reading and in making gains.

Collaboration for Results

In SCPS, teaching reading at high school was a new concept. It was accepted that students were supposed to know how to read by the time they got to grade nine, but data supported that many did not meet this expectation. The superintendent began discussions with the principals and developed a systematic step by step two-pronged approach:

1. research-based intervention for students reading below grade level, and
2. consistent literacy professional development for all teachers across the district.

Through collaboration with the Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR), the district identified research-based interventions for those reading below grade level. Plans were made for the acquisition of the interventions, selection of teachers, professional development of the teachers, as well as monitoring and evaluation of the implementation. This was the first prong to intervene with high school reading.

The second prong was district-wide, consistent professional development for high school teachers and administrators. This professional development was determined to be delivered by newly selected high school literacy coaches.

Leadership for High School Literacy

Leadership was essential for the success of such a large undertaking in a short amount of time so the superintendent appointed author Carol Chanter to coordinate all detail. Some of the most basic details may cause a district-wide plan of this nature to fail if overlooked or not well-executed. Plans for implementation actually began in October of 2004 for realization in August of 2005.

Since the project involved reading intervention programs requiring technology components, all hardware, furniture, and equipment had to be ordered, put in place and tested prior to the start of school.

All books, teacher resources, and student materials had to be purchased, inventoried and made available to the teachers

prior to the start of the school year for teacher planning purposes. Teacher and administrator professional development had to be scheduled and completed including backup sessions for teachers hired close to the start of the school year.

Communication with families was an important step related to student assignment in the interventions. All components came together and schools were ready for full implementation when the students arrived in August 2005. Even though initial implementation was successful, the work had only begun. Interventions required on-going support and professional development for successful completion.

In addition to teacher professional development to ensure fidelity to reading intervention, school leaders saw the need for creating a literacy system which would impact students across the curriculum. High schools that improve reading have both research-based reading intervention and literacy strategies infused into all classrooms (Biancarosa, G. & Snow, K.).

Working with small groups of reading intervention teachers is important, but not sufficient for improving the literacy achievement of all students. Since several schools had begun working with author Rose Taylor, she became a partner for developing consistent professional development for all high school teachers.

First, in order to support literacy across the curriculum, a train-the-trainer model for school-based literacy coaches was developed to provide literacy professional development for all content area teachers who taught standard classes including struggling readers. The second service was to work in individual schools with faculty and administrators to

ensure literacy implementation across all content classes.

The literacy coaches at each high school met with Rose once a month over a period of four months to develop professional development modules for content area teachers addressing the following:

Topic 1: Enhancing Reading, Writing, and Content Learning Using Classroom Libraries;

Topic 2: Comprehension Strategies and Question Answer Relationships (QAR);

Topic 3: Vocabulary and Fluency Strategies;

Topic 4: Reading and Writing Connection.

Following the development of each module, literacy coaches partnered to present the concepts to like groups of content area teachers.

For example, all biology teachers from the various high schools were brought together for professional development using content and topics from the biology textbooks to teach, model and practice how to incorporate literacy strategies in their content classes.

Likewise all geography, American and world history, and chemistry, earth space and physical science teachers experienced professional development in like content area groups focusing on the same literacy strategies as their counterparts in other content areas.

This model was extremely successful. The teachers made the connection between their specific subject areas and incorporation of literacy strategies so all students could be

supported to comprehend the texts in their classes while becoming better readers of non-fiction.

The second level of support Rose provided was to work with both the faculty and administration of each school to assist them in creating environments which included literacy daily non-negotiables or expectations. These daily expectations include:

- creating print-rich environments;
- teach, model, and practice literacy strategies before, during and after reading;
- reading to and with students;
- students reading by themselves with accountability;
- incorporating the processes of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, viewing,

thinking, expressing through multiple symbol systems).

High school leadership teams were also provided with professional development on creating a systematic approach to improve school-wide literacy. They began using the classroom literacy guide to support them in providing feedback to teachers and in reflecting with them.

Administrative teams attended teacher focused professional development to show the importance of literacy in all content classes and to continue their learning about literacy. Today, these high school principals can discuss reading intervention and literacy in content classes at a high level. In addition to using the classroom literacy guide (Table 1, page 41), they use the literacy leadership guide (Table 2, page 42) to reflect on their actions.

Table 1

Classroom Literacy Guide

Check the box for each line that best represents what you see in the classroom. PR=Progressing, P=Proficient, and RM=Role Model. Bolded items are essential for growth. The other items are necessary for supporting academic growth.

<i>The classroom has ...</i>	P R	P	R M	<i>Notes</i>
Literacy-rich and print-rich environment				
Attractive, risk-free, safe environment				
Smooth schedule, groups, transitions, student known routines & resources				
Student engagement not compliance				
Maximized time for literacy learning				
Integration of literacy learning with content standards				
Celebration of learning				
<i>The teacher ...</i>	P R	P	R M	<i>Notes</i>
Incorporates the seven processes of literacy				
Models joy of reading to and with students daily				
Provides daily accountable independent reading K-5 th ; 6 th -12 th level 1 & 2 students				
Assists students in selecting reading materials				
Incorporates critical thinking, 3 levels of cognitive complexity questions				
Promotes reading of non-fiction				
Monitors reading improvement through student achievement data				
Teaches, models and practices literacy strategies before, during, and after reading				
Provides word study periodically				
Integrates test prep into content teaching				

(Taylor, R. T. & Gunter, G. A., p 115)

Table 2

Literacy Leadership Guide for PreK-12

Self-monitoring will help identify areas for growth and celebration. You may use this form for self-assessment and for making professional development plans. Also, you may want to ask for input from a colleague. Place a check in the box that best represents you. PR=Progressing, P=Proficient, and RM=Role Model.

Literacy Leadership ...	PR	P	RM	Action Plan
Creates expectations across all content areas.				
Analyzes and organizes student data.				
Takes action on student achievement data.				
Ensures a systematic process of professional development that includes opportunities, participation, and follow-up.				
Participates in professional development with teachers				
Monitors instruction and provides feedback; visits classrooms daily and coaches teachers.				
Develops research-based intervention program and monitors student growth.				
Prioritizes appropriate personnel/materials/technology/schedule/use of time for Level 1 and Level 2 students.				
Leads the literacy leadership team in development and implementation of literacy system.				
Creates aligned system of curriculum/instruction/materials/technology/assessment/professional development/community engagement.				
Engages parents and community in literacy learning.				
Leads the selection of and monitors use of appropriate scientifically research-based student materials and technology.				
Creates commitment on the part of teachers.				

(Taylor, R. T. & Gunter, G. A., p 116)

What Was Learned About Literacy Leadership

No matter how detailed, procedures for implementation of any initiative will not achieve the desired change without strong leadership exemplified within a system of accountability. As stated by Bill Vogel (2005), the district superintendent, "There is a big difference between compliance and commitment. A project of this magnitude requires commitment." Getting to commitment requires continued focus on the data-driven goal. Keeping the goal of reducing the number of non-proficient readers in the forefront for all school and district leaders was key to success. It was also imperative to involve stakeholders at all levels including district, school, and

community. The results were gained by creating a system of literacy learning in the high schools.

Results of Making Reading the Center

After only one year of implementation, student achievement results are undisputable. Out of eight high schools with scores for both 2004-2005 and 2005-2006, 100 percent increased the percentage of ninth graders making learning gains on FCAT reading. Seven out of eight schools also increased the percentage of students meeting high standards in reading and four increased the percentage of the lowest performing students making learning gains. See Table 3.

Table 3

Percent Meeting High Standards and Making Gains

High School	Grade 9-Reading % meeting high standards 2004-2005	Grade 9-Reading % meeting high standards 2005-2006	Grade 9-Reading % making gains 2004-2005	Grade 9-Reading % making gains 2005-2006	Grade 9 Reading % of bottom quartile making gains 2004-2005	Grade 9 Reading % of bottom quartile making gains 2005-2006
1	54	59	56	72	68	65
2	56	62	54	66	51	59
3	46	55	50	68	50	68
4	56	61	56	66	47	54
5	49	55	55	64	58	56
6	58	58	55	62	49	53
7	47	55	55	64	51	50
8	55	63	54	68	53	61

In addition to FCAT gains there have been many additional qualitative benefits. Since the initiation in the fall of 2004, teachers and administrators gained access to the latest professional development, research-based

instructional resources, and support for improving student achievement.

The district gained new opportunities to improve literacy practice, and to focus

professional development on areas of critical need. Most importantly, the students benefited in all classes from the district-wide focus on the essential skill of reading.

Thanks to the ability of Seminole County Public School leaders to see things differently, communicate the vision, and shift perspectives, reading has become the center piece of high school instruction and has resulted in higher achievement and improved opportunities for all students.

Across the nation, many individual schools are making a positive difference in

student achievement, however, often times the improvements are tied to one leader or teacher and may not be sustained if the individual moves on.

The synergy that was created through this district-wide approach to program implementation and professional development is powerful enough to result in lasting change that will outlive differences created by individual teachers or leaders. This lasting change is what is needed to meet the demands of NCLB and for preparing students for the rigorous demands of post-secondary education and the world of work.

Author Biographies

Rosemarye Taylor is an associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Central Florida with a specialty in instructional leadership. Her research interests include leadership particularly as it relates to accountability. She has presented at numerous national conferences and her articles have been published in numerous magazines and journals. She has authored five books that reflect the commitment to all students learning more through leadership that creates ethical fail-safe systems. She serves as a consultant on literacy, learning communities, curriculum system development, and leadership to schools, districts and professional organizations. Past education experiences include teaching, high school administration and district administration in Georgia and Florida.

Carol Chanter has over 25 years experience in the K-12 setting as a special and general educator as well as a school and district administrator. She utilizes this experience in her current role as Senior Director of Implementation for Scholastic Education. She has presented at numerous conferences and has authored and co-authored several articles. Her areas of interest and expertise include general and special education, educational leadership, and secondary reading. She has taught graduate level courses at the University of Central Florida in the areas of reading and educational Leadership. She holds a BA in education, an MA in learning and behavior disorders, a specialist degree in educational leadership and her doctorate in educational research, technology and leadership.

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